

Sermon for Christmas Eve
Sunday, December 25, 2023
“Hope in the Midst of Chaos”

Text: John 1:1-14

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the most traditional and cherished Christmas traditions is the Midnight Mass from Nativity Square in Bethlehem, in the West Bank. Unfortunately, because of the war going on in that region and for the safety of the faithful that might have gathered there, Christmas was cancelled in Bethlehem. Can you imagine if the first Christmas in Bethlehem had been cancelled? We wouldn't be here today celebrating.

Over two thousand years ago, a little baby was born into a world that was no less chaotic, no less tumultuous, and no less unpredictable than ours is today, but that baby just happened to be God himself, who decided to manifest himself in this little speck of his creation that we call earth, and show humanity that God really *is* with us. Emanuel means ‘God is with us.’

The story of the Nativity is a story about a birth. None of us can remember our birth, but perhaps the story of your birth was told to you by your mother or father. For most of us, the details of our birth story is not all that important, but for that little baby born in Bethlehem of Judea over 2,000 years ago, the details matter, because that baby was God who became human. The creator of the entire universe loved us so much that he became one of us, subjected himself to the vulnerability of infancy, the burden of adolescence, the evolution into adulthood, just to be tortured and crucified three decades later. But doing it that way was the best way that he could show us that he is real, and that he loves us more than we could ever imagine. Jesus' birth means that he is our salvation and we are saved! Which is what the name of Jesus means... Yeshu'a: salvation—he saves.

Most of the time when we talk about Jesus and salvation, we speak of a future time and in a cosmic, celestial, or spiritual sense. We talk about the things at some future time that we have no idea when will be, complete with new bodies, new mansions, and new existences. But the birth of Jesus is important to saving us right now, in our very lives. The birth of Jesus also means salvation from ourselves and the world around us. Jesus came into a chaotic world over 2,000 years ago. It had lots of problems when he got here, and it still had problems when he left. Jesus didn't come here to fix all of the world's problems and create a utopia; instead he came to show us how we can enjoy a more satisfying life in the midst of our struggles, addictions, difficulties, sufferings, disasters, and losses. Jesus's birth and his life—that is, God's coming down to earth and dwelling among us—gave us a chance to see how God envisions our lives. God showed us how to get along with one another. God showed us how he has given us the gifts and tools to overcome any difficult situation that we might face—not that it would

suddenly disappear, but that we would have the strength to carry on, and be stronger after. The people in Bethlehem need to hear that right now, as they live in fear for their very lives. And we need to hear it in the midst of whatever struggles we might be going through.

Some people listening today may have lost loved ones recently or in the past year, or perhaps you've gone through a big life change. The holiday season is notorious for causing us to reflect on those things and bring our spirits down. But the birth of Jesus, the one who saves, is what can save us from ourselves, because he gives us hope that there is a future, if we just hold on—keep on keeping on, as my grandmother used to say—whatever is worrying us will be behind us. Whatever darkness we think we're facing, the light of Christ will illumine our path.

Today we celebrate an event that happened over 2,000 years ago when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us—God pitched a tent in the midst of the chaotic world and became one of us to show us how to live a fulfilling life in a chaotic world. The celebration of the nativity reminds us that the love of God and the light of Christ constantly break into our broken world, and that's what gives us hope. He came to a world that was as dysfunctional and unpredictable then as ours is now. Only nowadays, we have more powerful machines, stronger weapons, and more advanced technology. Sometimes we even have to live through natural disasters. Celebrating his birth every year reminds us that we can be kind, generous, thankful, and loving in a world that desperately needs more kindness, generosity, gratefulness, love, and hope. We have only to behold!

St. John Chrysostom put it best in his historical homily for this day:

BEHOLD a new and wondrous mystery. My ears resound to the Shepherd's song, piping no soft melody, but chanting full forth a heavenly hymn. The Angels sing. The Archangels blend their voice in harmony. The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The Seraphim exalt His glory. All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, and man in heaven. He Who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below; and he that was lowly is by divine mercy raised.

Bethlehem this day resembles heaven; hearing from the stars the singing of angelic voices; and in place of the sun, enfolds within itself on every side, the Sun of justice. And ask not how: for where God wills, the order of nature yields. For He willed; He had the power; He descended; He redeemed; all things yielded in obedience to God. This day He Who is, is Born; and He Who is, becomes what He was not. For when He was God, He became man; yet not departing from the Godhead that is His. Nor yet by any loss of divinity became He man,

nor through increase became He God from man; but being the Word He became flesh, His nature, because of impassability, remaining unchanged.

He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit, that He may save me.

God is with us. His light shines for us and his light shines in us. May you recognize the light of Christ shining in your hearts. May his light illumine your path and keep you in the warmth of his love. And may we all be the light of Christ that shines in the world bringing hope and peace. Amen. Merry Christmas!